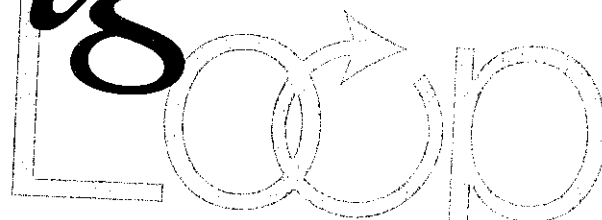


■ Patrick McCue

Closing

THE



on Classroom

Interventions

Teachers provide essential information about what interventions are needed and effective.

You're sitting at a meeting of your school's student study team (SST), reviewing a struggling student's work and standardized testing data and trying to figure out a plan to help the youngster be more successful. Everyone at the table agrees how much more productive the discussion would be if only the student's teachers were present. But none of their planning periods coincide, and the team has four more students to review at this meeting.

Early in my career as a high school principal, I found this type of scenario to be a major source of frustration because it often felt like we were spinning our wheels trying to develop a support plan for students without the benefit of direct teacher input.

A Breakdown in Communication

No Child Left Behind's mandate to close the achievement gap for students with disabilities and the emergence of response to intervention (RTI) as a means to address students' learning needs have led many schools to use more preventive academic supports within the general education classroom. The use of a diagnostic, intervention-based approach to determine the level of support a student requires is a welcome shift from the traditional reliance on standardized psychological or achievement testing to identify a disability.

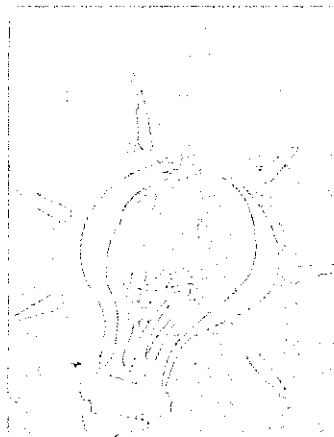
At many high schools, however, fragmented departmental structures and complex master schedules do not allow interdisciplinary teams of teachers to meet to discuss individual students' academic needs, develop intervention plans that have specific instructional strategies, and collaborate on what is or isn't working in their classrooms. Instead, teachers who work with the same student often operate in isolation, not knowing about practices that others may already be finding successful.

Moreover, the SST—which usually includes the counselor, the school psychologist, social workers, speech pathologists, reading specialists, the school nurse, and others—often lacks the benefit of input from the adults who know the student best: the student's teachers. That leaves a major gap in the team's work of identifying the

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Components of Successful RTI

- Give teachers professional development training and a common vocabulary on instructional strategies.
- Develop a system for gathering information about the student's strengths and needs from all the student's teachers.
- Create flexibility within the schedule to enable teachers to attend student study team meetings.
- Create a feedback loop to share the intervention plan with all the student's teachers so that they can implement strategies.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies.



root causes of academic difficulties and impedes the effectiveness of RTI as an alternative to special education.

Five years ago, when faced with that problem—and the rising expectations of accountability at the district, state, and federal levels—my staff at Irondequoit High School and I decided to change both our thinking and our practice. Our goals were to:

- Increase the use of teachers' classroom data to identify student learning needs, through both written feedback and direct teacher involvement in the study team process
- Create a system for synthesizing data from all the students' teachers and cycle it back to them so that they could learn from one another's practices
- Develop a bank of intervention strategies (using common vocabulary) that addressed the most prevalent areas of need
- Empower teachers in all subject areas to implement recommended strategies
- Monitor and assess the effectiveness of these interventions.

Intervention on the Front Lines

In 2004, with the support of the district's special education director, our school sent members of the SST to a two-day workshop on the classroom performance assessment (CPA) model developed by Wayne A. Secord. This framework—one of the earliest research-based models of RTI—enables schools to collect baseline data to identify academic needs or issues that interfere with learning and develop strategies for providing targeted support. Irondequoit's team saw the Secord model as a way to strengthen support for students by integrating teachers into the SST process.

Underlying the Secord model is the belief that the team should be

a problem-solving group whose purpose is to assist teachers with intervention strategies for dealing with the learning needs and interests of pupils. The [team] is grounded in the concept of intervention-based assessment, i.e. a pre-referral problem-solving, solution-focused, support-driven team can address most learning issues, and collect important data that 'builds the case' for a more thorough follow-up assessment process should it be necessary. (Secord & Wiig, 2003, p. 3)

The core of the CPA is a bank of indicators through which educators can assess student behaviors, academic skills, and abilities. The CPA is divided among several competencies, including reading, writing, listening, critical thinking, and executive functioning. Within those broad domains are the indicators of individual skills. Checklists in each domain can be used to gather data and diagnose problem areas.

After attending the Secord workshop, we formed an interdisciplinary committee (called the "toolbox committee") of teachers, counselors, and social workers to examine how the

model could be adapted to meet Irondequoit's needs. Once the committee members decided which domains, outcomes, and indicators would be used to identify areas of need, they began to develop a set of strategies that teachers could use in their daily planning and instruction. This "toolbox" of strategies gives teachers targeted interventions that address each student's weaknesses, with the expectation that the effectiveness of the strategies will be monitored and the results reported. The SST can use those data to determine what further information is needed to assess the student's progress and to identify additional strategies to try.

For example, if a student is experiencing difficulty developing a controlling idea or thesis when writing essays, the SST may recommend that the student learn how to use specific graphic organizers to develop his or her argument using textual evidence. Then after a few weeks of trying the strategy, the teacher reports back to the SST about the student's progress. Only when the recommended strategy produces limited or unsatisfactory results would the student be referred to the committee on special education for more intense study.

strategies that teachers could test, and using teachers' assessment of the strategies' effectiveness to determine next steps.

Using the Secord framework, the toolbox committee developed a teacher checklist that distilled the hundreds of indicators down to four core areas of performance that our teachers agreed reflected both our school's instructional priorities and our students' greatest areas of need: reading and writing, critical thinking, listening and speaking, and executive functioning. Over the course of a school year, the committee painstakingly crafted indicators that aligned with our district's comprehension outcomes as well as common gaps that we observed in our students' work. Teachers on the committee gave drafts to their departments for feedback to ensure that it was a document that all teachers could support—and use.

During the 2005–06 school year, implementation began. Under the new CPA process,



The Study Team Process at Irondequoit High School

- ❑ When an adult who is concerned about a student's progress makes a referral, the team sends a checklist of academic skills and performance indicators to the student's teachers.
- ❑ The team invites teachers to its review of the student. Participants discuss information from the teacher checklists, other academic data, and social-emotional factors that might be affecting the student's learning.
- ❑ The team creates a feedback sheet for teachers that summarizes the student's learning profile, including the student's strengths, needs, and goals and three or four targeted intervention strategies.
- ❑ Teachers are asked to try those strategies and provide feedback to the team on their effectiveness.
- ❑ The team reviews this feedback to determine next steps.

Implementation in Three Stages

Schoolwide implementation of the CPA process has evolved in three phases: developing a shared understanding of RTI and a common bank of intervention strategies, increasing communication among teachers and between teachers and the SST, and monitoring and evaluating the strategies. We knew that even if we were able to increase teacher attendance at SST meetings, we would never get full participation because of the limitations of the master schedule, so it was essential to develop a communication system that supports intervention-based assessment: gathering observations and information from teachers, analyzing that information, synthesizing some agreed-upon recommendations for

Irondequoit High School

ROCHESTER, NY

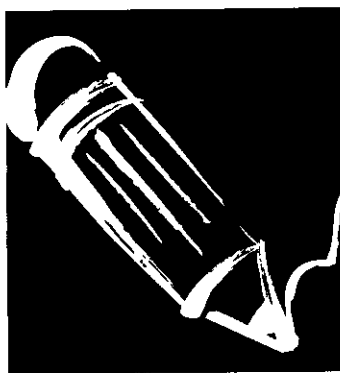
Grades: 9–12

Enrollment: 1,327

Demographics: 17.3% free & reduced-price lunch

Administrative team: 1 principal, 2 assistant principals

Faculty: 115 certified teachers



when a student's grades and other feedback indicate that he or she has significant issues that interfere with learning, a checklist is sent to all the student's teachers and the student is reviewed by the SST. At that meeting, the counselor or the school psychologist summarizes the checklist data so that the team can pinpoint gaps and trends and begin to identify potential interventions. Thus, regardless of how many of the student's teachers are able to attend the SST meeting, the team has access to rich information from all subject areas and can make more-informed decisions about academic interventions. Moreover, the toolbox committee also developed a feedback sheet that summarizes the SST review for the student's teachers—including the student's strengths, needs, and goals—and identifies three or four specific strategies that the teachers are asked to use, monitor, and provide feedback on.

The third phase of implementation—monitoring and evaluation—has proved the most lengthy and challenging. Having a shared understanding, vocabulary, and repertoire of strategies is pointless if we can't demonstrate that those strategies are having an impact on learning and achievement. Although the full toolbox committee is no longer active, a smaller steering committee of teachers continues to refine the monitoring and evaluation process. Currently, the committee is implementing an interactive, digital version of the feedback sheet on the district's internal network so that teachers can benefit immediately from one another's successes and challenges.

Participation Counts

The toolbox committee also worked on another key goal: increasing teacher participation at SST meetings. The teachers on the committee developed videos, mini workshops, and presentations to help their colleagues understand the role of the SST. They stressed the necessity of having teachers involved in the process and explained how the strategies that the SST identified could help teachers support the struggling learners in their classes. The administrators did their part by scheduling student reviews around teacher planning periods, providing spot substitute coverage, and sending personal e-mail reminders to teachers in advance of a student review. As a result, participation at SST meetings by teachers has nearly tripled over the past four years.

Strengthening teachers' ability and willingness to participate in the study team discussions has yielded other benefits, such as increasing their comfort level when making referrals to the team and empowering teachers to collaborate with colleagues independently without waiting for a referral to the SST. This type of capacity building promotes schoolwide "buy-in" for any complex change (Reeves, 2009) and is also essential for an effective RTI model.

When a regular classroom teacher suspects a potential learning problem, the teacher should attempt to resolve the problem. This may include (1) evaluation of the problem, (2) discussions with other teachers, parents and colleagues, (3) making instructional accommodations, and (4) documenting attempts to solve the problem. (Secord & Wiig, 2003, p. 3)

The checklist and teacher attendance at SST meetings have helped us create an effective communication loop at Irondequoit and strengthened the RTI process and our ability to meet students' needs. We also have noted

some positive trends since 2004, including a 30% reduction in referrals to the committee on special education and a 50% increase in the number of special education students receiving Regents diplomas. Most significantly, over the past four years our four-year graduation rate—our ultimate measure of success for all students—has improved from 85% to 92%.

Conclusion

Clearly, this is not a finite process; we expect it to continue to evolve and improve over time. One key component is ongoing professional development, including at least two teacher-led workshops at faculty meetings each year, teacher development of subject-specific strategies, and our new-teacher mentoring process. We also fine-tune the toolbox and checklist as we evaluate the effectiveness of strategies.

Thus, we continue to find ways—using technology, developing teacher ownership, and broadening our repertoire of interventions—to build teachers' capacity around academic interventions and to overcome the obstacles of the high school structure to more precisely address student academic needs in the place where RTI can have the greatest impact: the classroom. PL

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